



NEW TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER ANNOUNCED

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools announces the funding of the Emergency Response and Crisis Management (ERCM) Technical Assistance Center. The center will support 243 grantees funded under the Emergency Response and Crisis Management program in managing and implementing their projects, and in sustaining their efforts over time. The center also will help nongrant local education agencies (LEAs) improve and strengthen crisis management plans. Caliber Associates (Fairfax, Va.) will manage the center, under a contract with the Department of Education, and in partnership with the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University, Synergy Enterprises, Inc. (Silver Spring, Md.), and EnCompass, LLC (Washington, D.C.).

The center's work will focus on:

- Developing training materials, newsletters, and other resources;
- Conducting workshops and presentations to help grantees and other LEAs develop and implement emergency management and response action plans appropriate to the specific circumstances in their district;
- Providing technical assistance;
- Identifying and providing active referral links to resources and organizations that can be helpful to grantees;
- Developing and maintaining a listserv for sharing information about emergency response and crisis management programs and allowing for discussion among subscribers; and
- Conducting descriptive studies of emergency response and crisis management grantees that will include background information about improvements being made to emergency response plans, characteristics of the funded projects, common definitions, and key findings based on grantees' performance reports.

The center can be accessed at: <http://www.ercm.org> or by phone at (888) 991-3726.

The Emergency Response and Crisis Management grant program is designed to assist LEAs in improving and strengthening emergency response plans at both the district and school-building levels. Plans must address all four phases of emergency response: *Prevention/Mitigation, Preparedness, Response, and Recovery*. Additionally, plans must include training in emergency response procedures for school personnel, students, and parents. LEAs also are required to coordinate with local law enforcement, public safety, health, and mental health agencies in reviewing and improving their plans. For more information about the grant program, please visit:

<http://www.ed.gov/emergencyplan>

DID YOU KNOW . . .

Recovery is an often overlooked—but very important—part of the emergency response process. Recovery is the last phase of the four-stage crisis planning process, and involves providing a caring and supportive school environment so that staff and students can return to learning as soon as possible. To ensure effective recovery strategies and resources are available when they are needed, schools need to consider issues of recovery in the early planning stages.

The ERCM Technical Assistance Center interviewed several ERCM grantees to learn about their recovery plans and strategies for dealing with post-incident issues in their schools. These grantees included:

- Chris Saiz, Denver Public Schools (Denver, Colo.),
- Colleen O'Brien, Worcester School District (Worcester, Mass.),
- Kelly Ryan-Biskup, Maine School Administrative District #60 (North Berwick, Maine),
- Sidney Porch, Sweetwater Union High School District (Chula Vista, Calif.).

All four interviewees expressed the importance of having recovery plans in place for a wide variety of emergencies or crises that could occur in schools.

They also identified key aspects of the recovery planning process, which are outlined below.

Develop a Recovery Plan

The task force or team that develops the emergency response plan also should consider how the district will address the important aspect of recovery. As with emergency response planning, it is important to include top managers in the recovery planning process. According to Chris Saiz from Denver Public Schools, “In order to develop effective recovery plans, you need to include people with decision-making authority in the planning process.”

These plans should first identify the roles and responsibilities of the various personnel for each recovery activity. For example, Colleen O’Brien of the Worcester (Mass.) School District reported, “Simply stating that the assistant principal in charge of security will work with the district and local government officials to ensure that the building is safe for students is not sufficient.” Rather, the plan should specify what school (e.g., building engineer) or district personnel (e.g., district resource officer), government (e.g., Environmental Protection Agency) or social service agency (e.g., one focused on mental health) will collaborate with the assistant principal. A recovery plan also should include provisions for mental health services for both students and staff. To help expedite the delivery of services after a crisis, districts should identify qualified service providers in advance and develop procedures for utilizing their services.

Assemble the Crisis Intervention Team

Assembling a Crisis Intervention Team, or CIT, can be an important first step in the recovery process. The team can be either district- or school-based. For example, in Worcester, the school district collaborated with the Worcester Communities of Care, a community organization consisting of medical and mental health professionals, to provide training for school personnel. Psychologists, school-based counselors, and school administrators from each school in the district, as well as private and parochial schools and Head Start programs, received training. These teams can be deployed to schools whenever needed.

In Denver Public Schools, teams of counseling staff, psychologists, and social workers are assembled to provide “psychological first aid.” These teams are responsible for determining which students have been impacted from a crisis, as well as how they have been

impacted. Once the “zones of impact” are established, the teams can begin immediately targeting services to those most in need.

Having a large and diverse group of experts available to respond to a crisis ensures that a district will be able to handle large-scale crises. However, students may express a preference for interacting with a smaller group of counselors they know. For example, during one crisis in a Worcester high school, students voiced a preference for the school-based staff, not those from other schools, to be on hand for support. In York County, Maine, Kelly Ryan-Biskup reported that counselors from the local junior high school greatly helped high school students cope with the suicide death of a peer. These two experiences demonstrate how after a crisis, students might feel more comfortable interacting with people who have been a part of their daily educational experience and environment rather than with staff from outside their immediate school or city. Service providers in the community may want to assist after a crisis, only after consulting with the school-based team and with prior discussion with students and staff. As with any recovery support, only those with appropriate skills and certifications should be assigned to help students and staff recover from a crisis.

Conduct District and School-based Training

Numerous training configurations and models have been used to help school personnel manage the recovery process. Some districts use the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) model to increase a school’s capacity to recover from crises. CISM is designed to prevent stress effects as well as manage the recovery from significant stressors. It often includes pre-incident education, demobilizations, defusings, debriefings (Critical Incident Stress Debriefing), on-scene support services, crisis management briefings, follow-up services, professional referrals, crisis intervention training (with continuing education), individual and pastoral crisis intervention, and family support programs.

The effectiveness of Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) has been the subject of spirited debate among scholars, and a number of studies have demonstrated both the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of CISM. Critics of CISM point out that it is more of a first-responder model and not appropriate for school children. Critics also indicate that compulsory debriefings can be harmful, and that “cookie-cutter” approaches to trauma rarely work on individuals.

Advocates of CISM have generally responded by pointing out methodological problems with studies critical of CISM (e.g., many studies critical of CISM incorrectly focus on single-session debriefings provided to individuals, not group debriefings as intended by CISM). The effectiveness of CISM remains a controversial subject.

Ryan-Biskup noted that her team has adopted a modified CISM model called Post Traumatic Stress Management (PTSM). PTSM was developed by the Center for Trauma Psychology in Boston as an expansion of CISM focusing specifically on schools and communities rather than first responders. PTSM training involves a 2½-day certification course covering topics such as traumatic stress, coping and stabilization groups, one-on-one interventions, resource identification, and vicarious traumatization. Under York County’s ERCM grant, the district developed Project SMARRRT (Southern Maine Area Readiness Response and Recovery Teams). Project SMARRRT has trained a number of school staff members—including teachers—in PTSM as they are the ones who know the children best and can provide ongoing monitoring and support for students struggling with recovery. Since the start of their grant, Project SMARRRT has trained over 200 school and community members in PTSM. According to Ryan-Biskup, this extensive training has allowed Project SMARRRT to achieve its goal “to build small networks within schools and communities that could support themselves as well as be part of a larger network capable of supporting each other in case of larger disasters.”

Regardless of the recovery and training models implemented, interviewees report that it has been a constant challenge to maintain expertise. According to Saiz, “We need teams to be cohesive so they know what will unfold when they go out on a call.” In Denver Public Schools, this challenge was addressed by:

- Maintaining expertise at the district level so staff can continue to train at the school level;
- Encouraging ownership of the project by the relevant departments;
- Being “in constant training mode;” and
- Keeping a process in place to continue training every year.

Keep Students and Families Informed With Consistent Information

Immediately following an emergency or crisis it is important to keep families involved and let them know how schools are responding to any critical event. In

addition to issuing periodic bulletins to the media when schools are closed, the Sweetwater Union (Calif.) High School District transfers all telephone calls made to individual school buildings to the district office. Sidney Porch feels that this ensures that all parents and guardians receive consistent information about how the emergency or crisis is being managed. Following a crisis, Maine School Administrative District #60 works with schools to write a letter for teachers to read to their students. This ensures that all students receive the same message about the crisis and discourages the spreading of rumors. Many schools develop template letters in advance that can be quickly customized to address the specific crisis. Having templates available in advance can help save time in distributing important information after a crisis.

Focus on the School Building Environment

Following a crisis, buildings and their grounds may need repair, repainting, or landscaping. Schools and school districts should conduct safety audits and determine the parts of the facilities that can be used safely, and develop plans for repairing those that are damaged. In the Sweetwater Union High School District, students waited three days before returning to their schools following an incident in order to allow for the restoration of the physical environment, and adequate time for the health department to assess the air quality in the school building.

Assess Emotional Needs of Staff, Students, And Families

Assessing the emotional needs of all students and staff after a crisis should be done in conjunction with the community, parents, and the crisis intervention team. Together these individuals should identify:

- What is in place to respond to the emergency or crisis;
- What additional supports are needed for staff, students, or families;
- What, when, and how to discuss the incident with the students; and
- How to implement and model reflective listening.

In addition, parents and siblings of students directly involved in a crisis (e.g., suicide, death resulting from an auto fatality, or stabbing) may require additional services during the recovery phase. There are a variety of strategies that can be used to provide ongoing support. For example, using a service wrap around model and building on the families’ or siblings’

strengths, a team of professionals from the Worcester School District works with families to provide resources and services needed by each family member after a critical event—be it individually or as a group. Project SMARRRT of York County, Maine focuses particular attention on “crisis circles” (i.e., teachers, students, and others who were close to the victim). Although crisis circles involve the people immediately affected by a crisis, careful attention should also be paid to people affected by a crisis who may “fall through the cracks.” For example, younger siblings of victims can be overlooked easily if they are not in the same school where the crisis took place.

Recovery involves the healing of a community, not just those in proximity to a crisis. Schools need to consider not only how their recovery plans will support their students and staff, but also the impacts of crises on the parents and community members with whom those students and staff have contact. As with all parts of the crisis plan, recovery plans should be continually reviewed and updated to ensure that they are as complete as possible in the event of a real emergency.

Common Mistakes Made in Recovery Planning

Even if you cover these key aspects of the recovery planning process, simple mistakes are still common. Saiz identified some of the most common mistakes schools make in the recovery planning process. Two common mistakes made by schools are:

- *Children who have the most visible symptoms are seen as being the most impacted.* Grantees should keep in mind that children handle trauma differently, and withdrawn or quiet kids also can be severely impacted by crises.
- *Monitoring breaks down over time.* Schools need to find a way to monitor children in situations where impacts of crises unfold over time.

At the most basic level, recovery is about “moving on with learning.” Adds Saiz, “The best way to recover is to keep routines in place as much as possible.”

Recovery Resources

1. *Helping Children Cope With Violence and Terror: Tips for Parents and Teachers* (<http://www.nasponline.org/pdf/ViolenceTerrorHO.pdf>); last accessed on 4/06/2005
2. *Public Health Emergency Response Guide for State, Local, and Tribal Public Health Directors* (<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/planning/pdf/cdcresponseguide.pdf>); last accessed on 4/06/2005
3. *Suicide and Sudden Loss: Crisis Management in Schools* (<http://www.mental-health-matters.com/articles/article.php?artID=397>); last accessed on 4/06/2005
4. *After the Fire! Returning to Normal* (<http://usfa.fema.gov/safety/atf>); last accessed on 4/06/2005
5. FEMA Response and Recovery Library (<http://www.fema.gov/library/respondrecov.shtm>); last accessed on 4/06/2005
6. National Child Traumatic Stress Network (<http://www.nctsn.net>); last accessed on 4/06/2005

If you would like more information about each project’s recovery process, please feel free to contact our interviewees directly:

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This is the inaugural issue of the ERCMExpress. In future months, research, events, and other information related to school district emergency response and crisis management will be featured. For additional information about the Emergency Response and Crisis Management grant program, contact Sara Strizzi (sara.strizzi@ed.gov) or Tara Hill (tara.hill@ed.gov). Suggestions for newsletter content should be sent to Allan Porowski (aporowski@caliber.com) or to the Suggestion Box on the ERCM TA Center Web site at <http://www.ercm.org>.

This newsletter is prepared under Contract No. GS23F8062H by Caliber Associates for the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools. Sara Strizzi serves as the contracting officer’s representative. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service, or enterprise mentioned herein is intended or shall be inferred.

